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**The Quintessence of Sports Psychology and Language**

**A. Kaleb Rajan, Ph.D.**

# The Quintessence of Sports Psychology and Language

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## **Introduction**

Sports Performance has dramatically progressed over the past few decades. Performance levels that are unimaginable and unmatchable in earlier days are now common and the number of athletes capable of outstanding results is on the rise.

Along with the increase in the performance levels, interest in sports and games, especially at the spectator level, has gone beyond one's imagination in India and South Asia. Spectators around the country zealously display their loyalty to their own teams through the use of appropriate slogans, choice lexicon and gestures, etc.

## **The Focus of This Paper**

In this paper, I discuss the use of language in spectator sports and point out how language and nonverbal acts help the growth of solidarity among the members of the teams as well as their admirers. I also discuss the psychology of sports and sportspersons, and describe how psychology works in the sports field and training.

Psychology has to be channeled through the use of language and nonverbal acts in order to become a reality. Truthfulness and steadfast loyalty to the values of the games need to be cultivated and this will happen only if there is continued pressure from the spectators on the sports persons and sports organizations.

## **War Metaphors**

War metaphors have become very common in sports. Win, defeat, battle field, kings, super kings, warriors, swords, strategy, war cries, etc. are easily noticed. Regional royalty, throne, crown, wraps around the hip, shoulder decorations, etc. are part of the communication process.

## **Life Is Compared with Sports Events**

That players are compared with training in military is declared in many classical texts in Tamil and Sanskrit. There are many verses in the Bible that compare living to running race (1 Corinthians 9:24, Galatians 2:2, 5:7, 2 Timothy 4:7 and Hebrews 12:1). As individual achievements in the arena became a dominant spectator sport in Rome, scholars and theologians of eminence seized the opportunity to compare the need for

discipline in ordinary life and relate success in ordinary to the kind of discipline needed to win in sports. This trend is noticed in all cultures.

Ray Ratto of San Francisco Chronicle writes, "..., TV, radio and newspaper people have come to accept and repeat those descriptions as a way to bring the athlete's mind-set and speech patterns to a general audience. And before you know it, it made perfect sense to say, "They're in the war room trying to figure out whether to trade up or stay where they are and take the linebacker." (<http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2001/09/16/SP13378.DTL>).

In any case there is a long tradition of looking at sports preparation and performance from various angles. While gambling is denounced in all Indian didactic literature, I have not come across any reference against clean sports preparation and performance. In the past, participation in war as a soldier was viewed as something very worthwhile. Consider the PuranaaRu poem in ancient Tamil literature, where a mother declares that she does not know where her grown up son is, but she knows for sure that he will appear in the battle field. The interchange between war terms and terms from sports appear to go along well without any objection, because of demands on training and discipline and, of course, strict obedience to authority.

### **Sports Terms and Learning in the Classroom**

As students are into sports in large numbers, terms of sports enter the classroom in some victorious manner. Girish Sheshamani writes,

It is unarguably the most rewarding and excellent method to get your students involved. Down here, Cricket is a passion across all age groups. I make it a point to play recorded commentaries and ask the students to concentrate on the words. Once I finish playing the audio for ten minutes, I put it on pause and ask them for a feedback. Without exception I find the entire group being able to recollect and understand whatever was commented. Here I am talking about students who have no grounding in the English Language.

The beauty of commentary lies in the fact that different experts have different ways of getting the message across to the listeners. Another huge advantage I get while playing cricket commentaries is the accent does not vary significantly. I use this medium to get across the basics of speaking which is the rate of speech, voice modulation, pause, emphasis and the use of vocabulary.

The words used by the panel of commentators are very simple and easy to understand. They never use bombastic words. This gives students the motivation and drive to get fully involved in the learning process

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<http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/forum-topic/integrating-language-sports>).

### **Challenging Field and Intense Motivation**

A cardinal factor is that sports is a challenging field and intense motivation has encouraged long and hard hours of work. Besides, coaching has become more sophisticated, partially from the assistance of Sports Specialists and Scientists. Sports Sciences has progressed from descriptive to scientific. Bompa (1999) in his work *Periodization: Theory and Methodology of Training*, opines that broader base of knowledge about sports existing is now reflected in training methodology.

### **Competitive Sports – Success is Affected by Many Factors**

Sports, in the present world, have become extremely competitive. Again it is not the mere participation or practice that brings out victory to an individual. Therefore, sports life is affected by various factors, like Physiology, Biomechanics, Sports Training, Sports Medicine, Sociology, Sports Psychology, language communication (language of motivation), etc.

All the coaches, trainers, physical education personnel and doctors are doing their utmost to improve the performance of the players of their country. Supplementing this, Ghuman and Dhillan (2000) add that athletes/players of all the countries are also trying hard to bring laurels/medals for their countries in international competitions.

### **Unique Challenges before Athletes**

Today's athletes face some unique challenges. The standards are higher, the competition is tougher, and the stakes are greater. Among the best, preparation is more complete, and the psychological component is more important than ever before. Amateur athletes of yester years may have been able to distinguish themselves in competitions without developing a highly refined mental game plan, but to hope for that today is much like hoping that God will come down during the time to tell you how to turn a game around.

### **Mental Side of Performance**

During the last few decades, Athletic Coaches and Athletes from a wide variety of sports have begun to realize the importance of the mental side of performance. More specifically, individuals involved with organized sports now understand that, for athletes to perform at their peak level of efficiency, they must possess and use a number of psychological skills.

Weinberg and Jackson (1983) point out that the fact that the interest shown by Coaches and Athletes to enhance their teams' psychological skills proves the above statement to be true.

This fact has been established in the world of track and field as coaches and athletes have become interested in enhancing their athletes' psychological skills. Almost all performances depend on the ability of application of psychological skills in a hostile milieu. Increased mental skill will often contribute to better performance.

This aspect is driven home by Bud Getchell's statement, "Sports psychology which has long been recognized as an essential element in all physical activities and is generally considered to be a basic component of sports performances" (Bud Getchell 1976).

### **Sports Psychology**

During the past two decades sports psychology has emerged as a legitimate field of scientific inquiry. As with all scientific endeavors, sports psychology shares the same basic goals of science, the observation of events, the description of phenomena, the explanation of the factors that influence events in systematic manner, the prediction of events or outcomes based on systematic and reliable explanations and ultimately, the control of events or contingencies that result in expected outcomes.

Sports psychology in many ways is a fortunate scientific field of inquiry. Silva and Weinberg (1985) argue that researchers are afforded ample opportunities to observe, describe and explain the various psychological factors that influence diverse aspects of sports and physical activity.

Sports psychology when viewed, as a sub-discipline within the larger field of psychology, could be defined as an applied psychology or as a field of study in which the principles of psychology are applied. Unfortunately in India, sports' psychology is not traditionally recognized as a sub-disciplinary area of study within the field of academic psychology. Scientists, however, suggest that sports psychology is needed to be embraced by main stream of psychology.

The view of sports psychology, as a sub-discipline, within the field of sports and exercise sciences is uniformly stressed by scientists in physical education. Horl (1992) reiterates that the academic discipline of physical education consists of the study of certain aspects of such fields like Psychology, Physiology and Anatomy.

Sports and exercise psychology has evolved as an interdisciplinary field involving both sports scientist and psychologists from an initial focus on sports performance as the primary outcome of interest. Sports and exercise psychology has progressed to a large extent.

Performance enhancement remains an important area of research and applied work. But improvement of the quality of participant involvement in physical activity has emerged as the target area of researchers and practitioners. Although collegiate professional and elite amateur athletics have traditionally been the main recipient of inventions, professionals have expanded the horizon to include the youth competitors, adult recreational participants, master athletics and underserved population.

In keeping the wide range of population targeted for intervention, Van Raalte and Britton W. Brewer (1997) feel that, sports and exercise psychology, research and practice is extended beyond the playing field and laboratory to a host of other venues, including schools, health clubs, sports medium clinics, counseling centre and private practice offices.

### **Importance of Sports Psychology**

Psychology of Sports means applying psychological theories and concepts to aspects of sports such as coaching and teaching. The sports psychologists' use psychological assessment techniques and intervention strategies in an effort to help individuals to achieve their optimal performance. Sports psychology is concerned with analyzing human behavior in various types of sports setting. It also focuses on the mental aspects of performance.

Psychology as a behavioral science has made its contribution towards improving sports performance. It has helped the coaches to coach more efficient athletes to perform more proficiently and efficiently. This psychological aspect of sports is gaining much attention among sports administrators. Bucher and Wueget (1987) say that a rapidly growing area of interest in sports psychology warrants the use of stress management, procedures such as biofeedback and relaxation training to enhance athletic performance by reducing stress.

Preponderance scientific evidence obtained from different investigation have revealed that apart from somatic and psychological variables techniques and tactics, high level performance of a sportsman depends on his psychological make up. Different psychic abilities play decisive roles in achieving top level performance in track and field athletics. Therefore superb psychological fitness and training of the "individual" are important factors which help in achieving outstanding performance.

Psychology can help the sports man in the activity of sports excellence. Role of psychology in selection of sports, training materials and rehabilitations would definitely help in achieving this goal. Tigher et al. (1986) emphasizes that psychology and sports converge at the same point and excellence in sports can be optimally obtained by developing appropriate strategies.

## **Deterrents**

However, there are four inherent deterrents that impede sportsmen from reaching their goal. Anxiety is a major hurdle sportsmen have to cope with. This condition leads to state, trait and cognitive anxiety. These psychological traits culminate in stress affecting a person's mind set, hampering him from decision making.

## **Anxiety**

Anxiety results when an individual doubts his ability to cope with the situation that causes stress. Another important point that needs to be clarified is the difference between state anxiety and trait anxiety. Spielberger defines that the state anxiety can be considered to be more situational in nature and is often associated with arousal of the autonomic nervous system. Trait Anxiety can be thought of as a worldview that an individual uses, when coping with situation in his or her environment.

Previous research in areas other than sports and exercise psychology has indicated that individuals with high Trait Anxiety are anxious to attend to threat related information. Individuals with low Trait Anxiety are in State anxious to shy away from threat related information. Within the context of sports, those individuals who are low Trait anxious and also experience high State Anxiety will find the situation complementary to do a better performance; but, those individuals who are high Trait Anxious and experience State Anxiety will find it debilitating to achieve athletic performance.

Physiological arousal can influence performance as a result of the individual interpretation of their physiological symptoms. According to the model as Cognitive Anxiety increases it will be beneficial to perform at low level of physiological arousal, but is bound to have detrimental effect at high level physiological arousal.

Cognitive anxiety has been found to exert a powerful influence on performance. This statement holds true, regardless of the individual's skill level. Clearly the Cognitive interpretation an individual gives to a situation exerts an effect. The most powerful quality that elite performers possess is a high level self-confidence which may act as a protective shield from Cognitive Anxiety.

Clearly, Anxiety exerts a variety of effects on athletics performance. These effects vary, based on sports, gender and level of experience. In order to facilitate peak performances by athletes, sports psychologists must consider the three different facts of Anxiety: Cognitive Anxiety, Somatic Anxiety, and Self-Confidence.

Wiggins and Brustad (1996) argue that it is therefore necessary to consider all aspects of an individual's psychological functioning if sports psychology interventions are likely to arouse a maximum impact.

## Self - Confidence

Success in sports depends on trust in your own strength and ability. If an athlete is well prepared for competition from the physical, technical and tactical point of view, the most important factor deciding about his/ her degree of success is self – Confidence. Self – Confidence is considered to be one of the leading elements for a successful athlete. Belief in one’s self is at the center of sports performance. One of the most important factors determining self – confidence involves trust in our ability to execute a task. It is a part of a broader concept of the “ ego” , which is deeply connected to our self – evaluation or picture of us.

Self –Confidence or lack of it is built based on our interpretation of our experiences. It can be influenced by people who wield authority in our lives, such as coaches, family, friends and even other competitors. These people can positively or negatively influence our perception of our experiences and can emerge, to change our level of Self – Confidence. There is also room for outside influences on athletes’ confidences through training, usually with the help from a coach or sports psychologist. In fact, a big part of a coach’s responsibility should be to develop self confidence in their athletes, through out the development process using a variety of tools. Although it is always advisable to build on your own positive experiences, sometimes learning based on the observation of successes by other athletes is a useful tool as well.

The level of confidence an athlete has is one of the main factors influencing his / her perception of reality. In consequence, confidence decides about the level of stress the individual carries. The higher the level of confidence, the fewer stimuli that will be interpreted as a potential danger. This means that in very stressful situations, the level of fear will be substantially lower if the confidence level is higher. In effect, high confidence will leave more room in mind for rational evaluation of situation and will allow the athlete to make correct decisions. This ability to think clearly, under pressure is critical in highly tactical and short duration events. In fact, in some sports such as automobile or motorcycle racing, small mistakes can literally be deadly.

To quote the American poet Longfellow

The heights of great men  
Reached and kept,  
Were not achieved  
By sudden flight;  
They while their travellers slept,  
Travelled upwards in the night.

The poet, in a nut shell, brings out the sheer perseverance and grit of great souls to attain his unheard of goals.

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## Conclusion

Thus sports encourage the sporting spirit. Participating in sports activities is cathartic in effect. It reduces stress caused by a state of neurosis. It is a morale booster in times of a crisis. Participation in sports, sensitizes the person by sharpening his critical acumen. This results in talent exploration, galvanizing the participant towards venturing into meaningful, value – based pursuits that are ultimately soul- satisfying.

With discipline, life, language and games become well-ordered.

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